



**Past Wrongs**  
**Future Choices**

PWFC Works in Progress Series

## **Wartime Measures: “Palinode” and Other Poems**

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Thoughts, responses, and questions most welcome!

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FOUR-LEAF CLOVER

Night falls, and I open the album

I've chosen not to open until now.

At first, I don't understand

why she's left it to me: Polaroids

of a honeymoon in Vegas,

mimeographed evacuation orders—

and then, a dozen four-leaf clovers

pressed between wax paper,

looking, somehow, less fragile

dried than alive. We picked them

together. Or, over twenty years,

I watched her comb through tall grass

in parks, baseball diamonds,

overgrown lots, the backyard of the house

they would lose to debt—sifting stalks

so tangled they rippled like water

under her hands. What is luck

but an endless negotiation between

what one wants and will not have?

Having been an orphan, having been

born with a face that led to a camp,

she had seen more cruelty than kindness.

She saw it blossom in me: *Yancha*

*bōzu* she muttered whenever I hid

Lego in my sister's shoes, shattered  
    a snail's whorled home—*Engimono*

each time she found those four  
    lobed leaves, their radial symmetry

like an MRI of a dreaming brain.  
    What she loved most about the world

were its ephemeral forms: miso's  
    maelstrom in a bowl of stock,

the bubbles blown and tumbling  
    from a pipe cleaner's twisted loop.

*Shi*, she sighed near the end,  
    meaning *four*, or maybe *death*,

blood drying in the cracks  
    that cut across her lips and made it

hard to speak. I wouldn't know.  
    I never learned the tongue

she murmured behind closed doors.  
    Behind those half-open in my mind:

her swollen limbs, the x-rays'  
    ashen ghosts. What is luck

but someone else's easier history,  
    a hand drawn from a deck rigged

for regret? I am full of remorse  
    counting the moments I chose

to forget what she had  
    so keenly, ineffably, known. Luck:

the iridescence marbling

the bubble before it breaks. Luck:

a child failing to master

the future tense, an orphan shutting

the door to a tarpaper shack. Once,

when I was eight, she bought us

scratch tickets at the station

and won forty dollars. We played

until there was nothing left.

## PALINODE

My mother is stalking cabbage moths  
with a tennis racket. She looks  
most like herself when she tenses  
then swings over rows of kale and romaine  
at the white specks floating through  
blue shadows. She is bisected  
by the swaying frame, distanced  
by the poor resolution of the video  
my sister just sent. Her left hand  
is bandaged: tendonitis from picking  
caterpillars and eggs off the leaves  
with chopsticks. As if to prove  
obsession is its own lineage  
I have spent hours checking the sun-  
stunted shiso for iridescent beetles,  
bodies tufted with fine hairs  
like the down on a dandelion seed,  
spent years wondering what it meant  
to be her or her parents, uprooted,  
dispossessed. I can see so clearly  
time's possession in the way I speak—  
like her—the preference for detail,  
for impossible control, how my skin  
has pocked and wrinkled, the first gray hairs  
growing up my temples. I am thinking  
of the time she was enrolled in an ESL class,  
even though she only spoke English;  
the time she told me on the phone  
that because I had left, I couldn't  
come back; the time I stole twenty dollars  
from the jar under her bed; or all the times  
she corrected my pronunciation: *repeat:*  
*indistinguishable, inconsolable, inevitable*  
that I won't return home for another year.  
By then, she will have stopped dyeing

her hair. There are no equivalencies,  
only echoes. I am alone and watching  
my mother watching something above  
her head. My mother is swinging  
and missing. My mother is crying  
for her mother. My mother is referring  
to herself as *Oriental*. As *old*.  
The cabbage moths arrived on the coast  
in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, just before our family.  
Now, these shimmering beetles  
are weighing down the leaves.  
When I look back, my mother  
has become indistinguishable  
from the shadows under the trees.

AT THE BORDER

Its night. I'm not from here. Inside  
I'll press my fingers against the screen,  
recite my monosyllabic fealties  
while their dog sniffs up and down my leg.  
I won't be who they're looking for.  
Once, my grandparents were. A suitcase each,  
they shuffled down chain-link corridors  
and slept in livestock stalls. He was twelve.  
She was eight. Their lives incised  
by a hyphen that hadn't held, a censor's  
smear of ink. I think of how the dappled dark  
holds all other nights, like the faces in a face.  
Of how this falling snow is a kind of sleep.  
Of countries dreaming of being awake.

SABA

I point and the fishmonger  
hooks two fingers inside its jaw,  
lifts it gently from its shell  
of ice, and lowers it  
onto the scale draped  
in butcher's paper.  
Blue flames flicker  
under tigrine stripes.  
Examined closely,  
this mackerel is exponential:  
an ink-block print,  
an expression of surprise,  
cirrus-dappled sky,  
a still-life's thin-stemmed crystal  
and sliced lemon—  
or, of course, a silver belly  
charred golden in a pan,  
daikon grated like a hill  
of melting snow.

Home away from home,  
I run a finger over teeth  
fine as the burrs on a file,  
watch its eyes tarnish  
in the apartment's dry heat,  
and listen for the rasp  
as the filleting knife nudges  
where ribs wrap into spine.  
On speakerphone: a raspy cough,  
then my grandfather  
lapses into a language  
I was never taught.  
The starts and stops  
of steel scraping bone,



verbs and nouns  
balanced in absentia  
on the red wave of a tongue.

Salt-sweet, acidic,  
the fish tastes  
of the coastal shelves  
where it schooled each spring.  
Studied closely, any word  
is a primer in adaptation:  
from the Latin, *macula*,  
meaning spot or stain  
on skin, or an eye's burst vessel,  
sallow shade—the way  
my grandfather's  
have clouded with age,  
the way even memories  
become mispronunciations.

I remember the docks in Steveston,  
where he would lean  
over trays of frozen bodies  
fanned out like bouquets,  
prodding the scales  
and checking the sclera  
for clarity—*saba, hamachi, sake*—  
how once, jokingly,  
he called me *hāfu*.  
How, years later, at a reading,  
a man pointed out  
my struggle to say  
my mother's maiden name.

Who doesn't tire,  
now and then,  
of trying to map the past  
in the oily flesh of a fish,

the sour scent of a fruit,  
strangers asking for easy  
authenticity, clearer origins—  
or why the only words you know  
are the words for food?  
The only certainty,  
the uncertain imagination:  
pin bones bristling visible  
under the bevel  
of a blade, argent bodies  
plunging as one  
through their own refraction.

In an izakaya, blocks  
from the boardwalk  
where I grew up,  
my grandfather praised  
my wife's flawless pronunciation—  
couldn't fathom  
she'd learned it in a class.  
After we paid, he snagged  
two quarters from the change  
and, with a loose-wristed flourish,  
vanished them,  
proffering empty hands.  
I knew the trick.  
He taught me it  
when I was young.  
I could see the overlapping silver  
caught between  
his finger and his thumb.



